

WOLF APPEARED

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
28 March 1986

OPINION

Clarifying the issues on Nicaragua

By Robert R. Bowie

THE issue of Nicaragua deserves a more enlightening debate than it has had thus far. In arguing for the \$100 million for the "contras," President Reagan has relied more on hyperbole than analysis. And opponents have done little more to clarify the issues.

At this writing the issue is being considered by the full Senate. Since it likely will be before the House again in three weeks, an opportunity still exists for a more sober analysis of the basic questions of interests, aims, means, and their likely consequences.

About the Sandinistas, there are few illusions in the United States or Latin America. They are generally seen as a revolutionary and repressive regime, with many of their leaders Marxist-Leninists, aided by the Soviet Union and Cuba.

There is also a consensus on US interests:

- To ensure that Nicaragua does not harbor Soviet bases or Soviet or Cuban forces, or acquire offensive weapons.
- To protect its neighbors from subversion by Nicaragua.
- To see Nicaragua evolve toward a pluralist democracy.

For Mr. Reagan the way to protect all these interests is to help the "contra freedom fighters" to unseat the Sandinistas. Unfortunately, the contras, split among five or six diverse groups, leave much to be desired. The US-supported FDN group, with bases in Honduras, was organized by the Argentine military and the CIA. Most of the military command come from the Somoza National Guard, and the commander in chief and top political leaders are linked to former landowners, businessmen, and other Somoza associates. With this background, the FDN is not compatible with or trusted by other resistance groups that are more liberal and democratic.

Can the contras displace the Sandinistas in the foreseeable future, even with substantial US aid? Many observers are convinced that they have no prospect of doing so. The FDN has not been notably effective. It has attracted peasant insurgents, but not urban recruits. It has carried out terror and sabotage, but has not established a territorial foothold inside Nicaragua. Critics say US aid will enable the FDN to create disorder but not to defeat the Sandinistas; they fear that the US will then become more directly and deeply embroiled. Conversely others believe the contras can ultimately succeed, at least if the FDN can be democratized and united with the other rebel groups — a big "if."

Can these various United States interests be achieved

by other means? The first — no Soviet bases or forces — is directly related to US security. On that, the United States should explicitly warn the USSR and Nicaragua that US forces would be used to neutralize and if necessary destroy any such menace. Opponents of US aid have said that Congress would support such a course. Reagan's insistence that he would not use US forces is counterproductive.

As to countering subversion, those nations most endangered do not support the Reagan approach. They have joined eight other major Latin American states in opposing aid to the contras as recently as February, and urging instead the pursuit of negotiations with Nicaragua through the Contadora process. Apparently they are concerned that continued hostilities and the accompanying turmoil may gravely endanger their societies. The momentary invasion of Honduras probably reinforces this worry, while enhancing support for the contras in the United States. Thus far the Reagan administration has given only lip service to the Contadora process.

The Latin Americans have gotten Nicaragua to agree to a set of principles that would be a basis for regional stability, if followed. Specifically, Nicaragua has offered to agree to stop import of arms, to remove all foreign military advisers, and prohibit foreign military bases or missiles as well as end any support for subversion. Whether such agreements would be effective could only be determined by trying them.

The third objective — a pluralistic democratic Nicaragua — would be clearly desirable. But should it be a major US aim? The Sandinistas will surely not negotiate themselves out of power, or deal, as the US demands, with the FDN contras. Yet the Nicaraguan opposition parties have proposed to the Sandinistas a civilian human rights program which they might be persuaded to negotiate on.

Key Senate members wisely sought a bipartisan consensus on the Nicaraguan issue, and the House leaders will probably do so before the April vote. Most assume some aid will finally be approved: In doing so, Congress should prescribe a sufficient interval (probably at least three months) for pursuing the Contadora route. Congress should itself also determine by a second vote whether negotiation had been constructively pursued and proved futile. If Contadora fails after a good-faith effort, the case for support of the contras will be more defensible and more likely to attract general support.

Robert R. Bowie has been concerned with foreign affairs for nearly 40 years on the Harvard faculty, in government posts, and as a consultant.